

Editorial

Sailing close to the wind: Italy in the aftermath of the 4 March elections

As we were going to press in early May 2018, the deadlock surrounding the formation of a new government looked no closer to being resolved than it had in the immediate aftermath of the 4 March elections. The focus was mainly on the Democratic Party (PD), which was tearing itself apart over the issue of whether or not to support a government lead by the Five-star Movement (M5s). It was understandable that Matteo Renzi and his followers were bitterly opposed to such an eventuality given their essentially top-down, majoritarian and technocratic perspective on politics. Being in coalition with a party that professed a belief in participatory democracy; that wanted to undo many of the outgoing government's flagship policies such as the Jobs Act and the Buona Scuola; that would benefit from the media profile, and heightened capacity for leadership, enjoyed by prime ministers in recent years; that might blame any policy failures on its junior partner: this was not an attractive proposition. Equally understandable was the position of Renzi's internal opponents who, precisely *because* of the Movement's ambitions in relation to the Jobs Act as well as other matters, saw in the prospects of an arrangement with the M5s, the opportunity to 'domesticate' it and to shift the 'centre of gravity' of Italian politics to the left.

Such critics were driven by assumptions that had dominated the politics of the old Communist Party and the First Republic – that the democratic game was less about the construction of majorities and the principle of 'winner takes all', than it was about the pursuit of power through negotiation and the search for workable compromises – assumptions reflected, in this issue, in the article by Antonio Floridia and his discussion of electoral-law reform. For them, negotiation and the pursuit of a left-of-centre agenda offered the best prospects of addressing the multiple insecurities faced by ordinary people and so countering the growth in Europe of populism which elsewhere had led to constitutional crises – most notably in the UK, with Brexit – and now looked as though it might just do so in Italy too unless the government crisis could be resolved.

This of course begs the question of whether the two great 'winners' of 4 March – the League and the M5s – can indeed be accurately described as 'populist'. Especially in the case of the M5s, the election's aftermath provoked some debate about this. We think that it *is* a populist party; for such a party – we would argue – is one that not only claims to represent the interests of 'the pure people' against the 'corrupt elite' but claims to have a *monopoly* on the ability to do so *where the 'corrupt elite' is represented by competitor parties*. Therefore, the genuinely populist party is one that implicitly and sometimes explicitly challenges the liberal component of liberal democracy by implying a) that the support of a majority of the people is alone *sufficient* to justify actions when in office, and b) that other parties are not legitimate contenders for government.

The M5s, with its diatribes against '*la casta*' certainly has strongly populist characteristics in terms of rhetoric. It does also tend to imply that it has a monopoly on the ability to represent ordinary people and that the other parties are illegitimate as potentially governing actors. And one might also argue that its dismissal of liberal principles in this sense is reflected in one of its flagship policies, with its apparent ambition to abolish, in the name of the people against the '*casta*', article 67 of the Italian constitution which stipulates that 'each Member of Parliament represents the Nation and carries out their duties without a binding mandate'. For the Movement, the Member of Parliament should not be free of mandates; for in its conception parliamentarians are delegates, not trustees, bound by the will of those who got them elected. This, in our view, is populist because it eliminates the space for deliberation and so offends against the liberal principle that decisions should be preceded by authentic discussion and debate, and not merely the aggregation of preferences that occurs in voting.

Still, this perspective on the M5s is by no means a matter of consensus and readers will find a somewhat contrasting view set out in the article by Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti in this issue.

What is less contentious is the suggestion that the rise of populism and the democratic crisis in Europe has generated, in the search for solutions, considerable reflection both within and beyond the walls of academia, about the nature of democracy and the criteria that must be fulfilled if it is to be of high quality. Both the article by Floridia and the one by Lorenzo Cini and Andrea Felicetti should be read very much in this vein. Whether participatory and deliberative perspectives can ever actually be reconciled – philosophically if not practically – is something we would doubt; for if the former is based on assumptions of separateness, inequality and the pursuit of power, the latter denies these things. Still, in considering in their different ways, what is the single most fundamental issue in European and Italian politics today, Cini's and Felicetti's suggestions, as those of Floridia, perform a very useful service in responding to Sartori's call for a political science that is applied – that produces knowledge which is, 'to some extent, 'useful' for the well-being of society at large' (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2017: 230). Much the same can be said of the piece by Gianluca Passarelli and Dario Tuorto which explores how the three largest parties have responded, in more or less innovative ways, to one of the most significant fallouts of the democratic crisis – the weakening of the linkages between parties and their members – and therefore what party membership in Italy now means.

Finally, it could be argued that the kind of democratising reform Cini and Felicetti call for is to some extent already to be found, as Raffaele Marchetti's article suggests, in the interaction and synergy between the Italian government (especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), and civil society organisations, that has enabled Italy to play a leading role in bringing about normative change at an international level. Marchetti's conclusion – that both the government and civil-society organisations – have derived considerable tangible benefits from the synergy between them, should serve as an antidote to the overly pessimistic perspectives on Italian politics and the health of Italian democracy to which one might otherwise be inclined in the aftermath of the 4 March elections.

References

Pasquino, Gianfranco and Marco Valbruzzi (2017), 'Sartori and Italian politics: joy and sorrow', *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 9(3): 229-45.

James L. Newell
University of Salford
j.l.newell@salford.ac.uk